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Reagan and Central America

As televised speeches go, President Reagan produced a masterful rendition Wednesday night of his vintage self at his persuasive best.

There was an illustrated history of communist encroachment in the Western Hemisphere, including a sketch of the good guys and the bad guys. There were stirring phrases like "freedom fighters" and "reign of terror," and hovering specters of peril like Fidel Castro, the Kremlin, Moammar Khadafy and the PLO.

For the fearful, the President offered the soothing assertion that he has no plans to send U.S. troops into combat in Central America. And for the skeptical, there were assurances that "peace" in the region—despite the U.S. military might displayed in Honduras and the CIA's insurgent war against the Sandinistas—should be pursued through economic aid and through negotiations.

There was a reminder of Washington's "legal right and moral duty" to resist subversion and aid the hemisphere's democratic governments.

And there was a warning that those who disagree with his policy toward Central America risk fitting the label of "new isolationists," a bunch not much different from their brethren of the late 1930s who knew what was happening in Europe but chose not to face the truth.

The warning and the rhetoric, florid and simplistic as they are, have a valid purpose: The necessity to nudge skeptical congressmen into clearing funds for military and economic aid to El Salvador in the face of a threatening major offensive by Cuban-backed rebel forces. And for that, Mr. Reagan's timing was impeccable: the probable election of the moderate Jose Napoleon Duarte as president of El Salvador will surely strengthen the President's case in Congress.

Though there is little doubt in Mr. Reagan's contention that the Soviets and Cuba wouldn't miss an opportunity to squeeze the United States by backing anti-American subversion in nations close to the U.S. borders, he oversimplifies the situation. As he presents it, what's going on in Central America is a gladiator match between Uncle Sam and the Soviet bear, with the bad guys on their side and—naturally—nobody but good guys on ours.

The bads are the Sandinista rulers of Nicaragua, sketched by the President as a devious group of anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic aggressors who betrayed the anti-Somoza revolution by becoming Cuban and Soviet lackeys in league with the PLO and willing to take help from the likes of a Col. Khadafy.

The goods are the Nicaraguan Contras, the thousands who fought with the Sandinistas but have now taken up arms against them—the "freedom fighters" struggling to wipe out the Sandinista "communist reign of terror."

This good guy-bad guy approach is easy to get across on TV, but it glosses over the complicated economic, social, historic and nationalist reasons behind the prolonged struggles in the troubled region.

Mr. Reagan is correct in his assertion that the United States has "provided just enough [military] aid to avoid outright disaster but not enough to resolve the crisis." More aid is needed. But until this country deals just as realistically with those complex underlying problems, there is little hope that negotiations will lead to any short-term success, and little reason to believe that the need for massive military support will end.